

**West Mojave Plan
Task Group I
Green Tree Inn, Victorville
January 18, 2001**

Attendees

Task Group: Ileene Anderson, Margie Balfour, Paul Condon, Mike Connor, Gary Ethridge, Clarence Everly, Art Gleason, John Gustafson, Mark Hagan, Shirley Hibbetts, Gerry Hillier, Harold Johnson, Manuel Joia, Peter Kiriakos, John W. Kittell, Paul Kober, Daryl Koutnik, Gene Kulesza, Charles LaClaire, David Mathews, Steven Morgan, Stan Murphy, Lisa Northrup, Lorelei Oviatt, Doug Parham, Mike Rauschkolb, Randy Scott, Courtney Smith, Patricia Smith, Larry Trowsdale, Barbara Veale, Ed Waldheim, Marcia Wertenberger.

West Mojave Team: Chuck Bell, Bill Haigh, Ed LaRue, Valery Pilmer.

Introduction

Bill Haigh opened the meeting at 9:55 AM.

Meeting Notes: No changes were made to the December 1, 2001 meeting notes.

Updates:

- **Stipulation and Proposed Order - Center for Biological Diversity, et al. Lawsuit:** Bill Haigh advised the Task Group that a stipulation was signed by attorneys representing the plaintiffs, intervenors, and the BLM on January 17, 2001 in partial settlement of the lawsuit. Bill indicated that the order has not yet been signed by the federal district court judge. He then gave an overview of the settlement agreement. A news release providing an overview of the settlement stipulations and a copy of the documents can be viewed at the following website: www.ca.blm.gov/news/lawsuit_settlement_nr.html.
- **Ft. Irwin:** Bill Haigh advised that the legislation relating to the expansion of Ft. Irwin was signed by President Clinton on December 21, 2000. The Key Elements Report referenced by the legislation was completed and submitted to Congress on January 12, 2001. Bill indicated that a copy of the report will be posted on the West Mojave website once he gets clearance to do so. By mid to late March 2001, Fish and Wildlife Service must submit a preliminary review of the Key Elements Report and outline an approach for implementing its provisions. This approach will not constitute a formal consultation under Section 7 of the federal Endangered Species Act but will assist the Secretaries of the Interior and of the Army in more precisely defining the nature and scope of those provisions.

Mohave Ground Squirrel Discussion

Life History Overview: John Gustafson, California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG), provided an overview of the life history of the Mohave Ground Squirrel. The following points were made during his presentation:

- The MGS is a full species mammal found only in California. It is not a sub-species. Of the seven ground squirrel species found in California, the MGS is the only one that is found nowhere else. This is unique for a mammal.
- There has been no effort to describe subspecies for this animal since its range is so small.
- MGS was first described in 1886 at Rabbit Springs in Lucerne Valley.
- The animal is diurnal, meaning it is active during the day and rests at night.
- The species spends approximately seven months of the year sleeping under ground. Scientists believe the animal does this in response to scarce food sources. MGS comes out in January or February and spends much of its time eating in order to gain sufficient weight to breed and to survive through the following winter. Young animals are above ground longer than mature animals, perhaps until August, in order to put on more weight to survive the months below ground.
- The MGS eats whatever it can find: green vegetation, insects, seeds, etc.
- In years where rainfall is insufficient, MGS does not reproduce. Rather, the animals spend their energy putting on weight. At the Coso study site, a minimum of 75mm of rain was needed to support sufficient plant growth for reproduction to occur.
- Distribution is probably based on total rainfall and pattern of rainfall over time.
- The MGS life span is about three to five years. If there is no reproduction over 3 to 5 years due to low rainfall, the local population will disappear. Rainfall greatly affects the species. If populations become fragmented, repopulation of areas may be impossible due to physical barriers.
- The dispersal of young squirrels is believed to be food resource-driven, in that the young animals must find their own areas in which to forage and dig burrows. Phil Leitner, an MGS expert, found that young squirrels, particularly males, can disperse quickly.

The following questions were asked:

- How many young are born per litter? Mike Connor indicated that Phil Leitner found 3 to 4 young were born per litter.
- Where did the data come from for the mapping of historical sightings? Ed LaRue responded that the map was compiled by Debi Clark in 1993-95 primarily from data contained in the Natural Diversity Data Base. He noted that the historical record reflects where people have looked for the squirrel, not necessarily where it can be expected to occur.
- Has CDFG done a population trend analysis for MGS? John Gustafson responded that it is known that the squirrel doesn't occur today in many of the places it used to, but a formal trend analysis has not been undertaken. In several areas where follow up surveys have been done (Coso, Pilot Knob) the MGS population appears to be down considerably.

- What constrains the range of the squirrel? John Gustafson responded that no one really knows why MGS doesn't extend further into Inyo County. To the east it may be too dry; biologists are uncertain as to why the squirrel isn't found further to the north. Gustafson indicated that MGS might extend further west in the Antelope Valley where appropriate vegetation exists, and possibly into the Ord /Rodman area.
- Where is the round tailed ground squirrel found? Gustafson replied that it occurs in a region extending from the southeastern boundary of the MGS's range to the Coachella Valley. It prefers sandier soils than the MGS.
- How do we protect MGS when we know so little? Mike Connor commented that this is the real problem, as we really don't know whether the conservation areas should be somewhere other than where they are proposed. Gustafson commented that many areas have not been surveyed for MGS. Trapping is problematic because if food is plentiful, MGS may simply not be attracted to food in the trap.

MGS Update from Ed LaRue: Ed LaRue displayed a map showing areas where requests have been made to modify the boundary of the MGS Conservation Area. Requests have been received from the City of Ridgecrest, Inyo County, and individual property owners, particularly in the Trona and Searles Lake area. All requests will be displayed on a single map and will be reviewed as a whole with CDFG staff to see what modifications will be acceptable.

Subcommittee Updates:

- **Biological Goals:** Mike Connor presented the update on biological goals for the MGS. Connor, Peter Kiriakos, Becky Jones and Ed LaRue met and discussed the goals proposed in Chapter 3. They focused on revising the goals slightly so they are more biologically oriented. They also provided a preamble to establish a framework for the goals. (See handout entitled Revised Biological Goals for the Conservation of the MGS). The group discussed the overall need for flexibility in dealing with MGS as so little is known about the species. Randy Scott stated that management prescriptions don't work for private land. He distinguished between management on public lands, and mitigation on private land. **The group concurred with the recommended revisions subject to the incorporation of language to be provided by Randy Scott to address his concern cited above.** Gerry Hillier qualified that concurring with the goals does not mean the counties are endorsing the management prescriptions.
- **Compensation Subcommittee:** Lisa Northrup spoke on behalf of Laurie Lile, spokesperson for the subcommittee. The subcommittee held two meetings, and are in the process of developing an approach. Only two responses from the eight entities had been received prior to today's meeting. They hope to receive more responses by e-mail shortly, then get back together to reach consensus on an approach. The subcommittee will bring back a recommendation at the February 23rd Task Group 1 meeting.
- **Research Subcommittee:** Ed LaRue indicated that the committee has not yet met. Ed

also indicated that the MGS Technical Advisory Group, formed two years ago, has put together six proposals on how it wants to study MGS. Bill Haigh indicated that he is looking at applying some of the West Mojave Fort Irwin money into their efforts because of Fort Irwin expansion into the MGS Conservation Area and designated MGS crucial habitat.

Desert Tortoise

Conservation Strategy Summary Chart: Bill Haigh referred the group's attention to a summary chart prepared by Ed LaRue. The purpose of the chart was to lay out, in one convenient document, the results of Task Group 1's work during 2000. The chart summarized the recommendations of the September 1999 Evaluation Report, and indicated how those recommendations have been adopted and/or modified by the Task Group. It identified issues which remain unresolved or which have yet to be addressed, and provided suggestions developed by the planning team for resolving those issues.

Bill Haigh noted that there are two versions of the chart. One is organized by general topic, and the other by the task group or subcommittee which, in LaRue's judgment, is the most appropriate body to develop recommendations to resolve remaining issues. Haigh also agreed to e-mail copies of the report to task group members, as well as a list of the members of the various subcommittees. Task Group members will be afforded an opportunity to join a subcommittee, provided they are willing to commit to do the work necessary to accomplish the subcommittee's task.

Accordingly, Haigh asked the Task Group to spend the next two weeks reviewing the charts, and to be prepared to be contacted by Ed LaRue as part of the team's effort to complete the tortoise conservation strategy.

Tortoise Distance Sampling: LaRue indicated that a tortoise distance sampling meeting will be taking place in Barstow on January 24, 2001 to coordinate distance sampling this spring. Fort Irwin has money to perform 100 of these transects. Participants would like to see 60 transects in each DWMA and they are trying to see how they can accomplish this. Distance sampling will involve surveying the same area three years in a row. Surveys will be of animals only, not tortoise sign.

Next Meeting Date

Task Group 1: Friday, February 23, 2001
Wednesday, April 4, 2001

Both meetings will begin at 9:30 AM and will be held at the Green Tree Inn in Victorville.